2014

Love in the Ruins: Walker Percy, Aristotle, and the Freedom to Live an Ordered Life

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WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY GENERAL EDUCATION DISCUSSIONS (2014)

LECTURE TITLE:
"Love in the Ruins: Walker Percy, Aristotle, and the Freedom to Live an Ordered Life"

PRESENTER:
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Talk (10-15 Minutes):

I would like to begin with a distressing remark: I would like to begin with a quote from Walker Percy's post-apocalyptic novel, *Love in the Ruins*: "Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last?"[1] Percy held the Christian view that the world is corrupt and decaying – though not bad in itself. He was not a fatalist, but the created world has been corrupted by temptation and sin. As I ponder this eschatological belief, which was quite strongly argued in St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (City of God), I cannot help but think that either we are wrong as Christians, and are crazy, or we are correct, and the world is collapsing under the weight of the Fall. Either way, as Percy suggests, the results are not pleasant, and the world he describes in *Love in the Ruins* – our world – mostly continues to live ignorant of its own decline. Percy writes of people abandoning their broken and dilapidated cars as if that was the normal state of automobiles. Percy, like Aristotle, insists that knowledge – that truth – frees us from both naïve optimism, and benighted ignorance. So, what we teach our students in a collapsing world matters, because knowledge, as Sacred Scripture informs, liberates us: "And you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."[2]

I believe that modern pedagogy is less effective and less intellectually nourishing than it was previously, than when it was structured around the classics – called classics because they are timeless, and because they access the human spirit. We seek employment rather than betterment, and facts rather than wisdom. In his trenchant work, *Come to Think of It*, G. K. Chesterton wrote that those who advocate only facts, only practical matters, in education do not actually understand what a fact is. "Facts do not always create a spirit of reality, because reality is spirit."[3] A Christian education, if

properly Christian, is more concerned with the Permanent Things than those other things that pass away, such as jobs, salaries, entertainments, and even universities. Walker Percy once wrote that many people "make straight As and still flunk ordinary living."[4] The general education curriculum at any Christian institution must prepare students for the realities of living . . . as a Christian . . . in a world that Scripture teaches us is often inimical to the way Christians are called to live. Historians are privileged in that they spend their lives comparing the past to the present, and while our current curriculum does, I argue, make us nicer people, it does not usually, I argue, make us more intelligent people. For that we must read the thinkers whose thoughts were directed toward making us better thinkers: Socrates, Sapho, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Mencius, Augustine, Averroes, Nagarjuna, Aquinas, Teresa of Avilla, Hilegard of Bingen, and perhaps Thomas Merton. And we should remember that excerpts are forgettable – anthologies give us false confidence in knowing what these persons teach without taking the required time to properly digest their ideas.

I imagine perhaps a more radical shift in Whitworth's curriculum than many of my fellow professors in the Academy. If I was Tsar of Whitworth's general education curriculum, I would recommend a return to the classical education that modern pedagogues have jettisoned in favor of secular progressivism. Let us retain what new insights we have gained as a society since the so-called "Enlightenment," but let us also revisit what Socrates had to say about the life of the mind – and soul – before he was charged to drink hemlock and die for being too much of an irritant to those who fear the life of the mind. Of those works published in recent decades, I have read almost nothing more summoning to the human condition than works published one, two, and three millennia ago. We are in the ruins of Western society – some prefer the ruins to the palaces that have been demolished – but Christianity is a religion of hope. In the Vulgate version of Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, we read: "*Spe salvi facti sumus*," or "in hope we were saved."[5]

Now to the constructive and more optimistic portion of my remarks: First, all this being said, Whitworth is doing quite well in that we understand the necessity and benefit of a Liberal Arts education. Though, I recommend a better understanding of precisely what that is. We distinguish our self as a "Liberal Arts institution," and our

general education courses aim toward fostering this identity. This term is not merely a loose idea, however, that can be applied to any course of study; the Liberal Arts are a craft, which should be learned before, or in addition to non-Liberal Arts disciplines. The very concept of the Liberal Arts derives from the Medieval Christian notion of *artes liberalis*; these include seven liberal arts appropriate for a free person. "*Liber*' means "free," or even to "make free." The seven *atres liberalis* exist in vital contrast to the *artes mechanicae*, which are courses of study pursued for economic purposes. These non-Liberal Arts courses of study are the "vocational and practical arts," as Professor Mark Roche describes them.[6] Thus, the more a university dedicates itself to these "vocational and practical arts," the further it moves away from the Liberal Arts.

To be accurate, the Liberal Arts include the Trivium and Quadrivium: the first three subjects being language (grammar), oratory (rhetoric), and logic (dialectic); and the final four are geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. For the Christian intellectual of the Medieval era, it was after learning the seven Liberal Arts that one undertook the "mother of all learning" – theology. My radical recommendation, then, is that Whitworth more accurately identifies what the Liberal Arts are, and also begins a process of teaching a general education curriculum that more accurately bears an organic connection to these seven areas of study. Now, it is acceptable to disagree with Walker Percy, or Aristotle, or me, but we can only intelligently disagree with what we thoroughly know. To restate the famous motto of the Enlightenment: "*Sapare aude*!" – "Dare to know!" What if our general education courses more closely followed the Liberal Arts ideal? What might a more classical education curriculum look like? And finally, does our current Core curriculum already satisfy the requirements of an authentic Liberal Arts education?

I'll answer the last question first. I think our present Core should continue to discuss how to better encourage the conditions of a rigorous Liberal Arts education; we should be vigilant not to provide more of an indoctrination to "Whitworth culture" than an education that deeply challenges – and liberates – the mind. I suggest a more exhaustive investigation into the ideas of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. By this I do not mean the "spritzer bottle" exposure that Whitworth students presently receive in our general education curriculum; I recommend actually drinking these important thinkers in large glasses, or even pitchers. Socrates, for example, provides a way to consider the

seemingly haphazard movement of change in our current society, defining proper progress, as Samuel Stumpf puts it, as "the product of God's universal Reason (*logos*)." God is Reason, and Haraclitus saw this Reason as "the unity and order of all things."[7] The key word here is "order"; the difference between chaotic change and reasoned progress is order.

In our list of works to slowly drink in and digest must be Aristotle, for he trains the mind to separate conclusions based on uninformed feelings from those based on verifiable evidence. When introducing his work on rhetoric, or oratory, Aristotle describes three modes of persuasion: persuasion "based on the character of the speaker," and persuasion "by putting the audience into a certain frame of mind." These two are trite and temporary, and appeal only to the passing fancies of human feeling. But the third form of persuasion Aristotle suggests is based "on proof."[8] Our general education courses would generate better and more persuasive writers if our students read more Aristotle, and excised the words "I feel" from their academic papers. But in the end, the most salutary aspect of an education based on the Liberal Arts model is that it centers on what James Schall called "the ultimate meaning of existence." The most penetrating question a person can ask of one's self, Schall suggests, is, "Why do I exist?"[9]

I'll conclude here with three assertions that might underscore what I am attempting to convey about the importance of an authentic Liberal Arts curriculum in a Christian university:

First, the philosopher, Josef Pieper, wrote that: "It might well be that at the end of history the only people who will examine and ponder the root of all things and the meaning of existence – i.e., the specific object of philosophical speculation – will be those with the eyes of faith."[10] In this declining world, faith is being replaced with a concern more for material pleasure than the lasting pleasure of an eternity with God, the God of faith.

Second, St Cyprian, in his "Sermon on human mortality," wrote succinctly that, "The world hates Christians."[11] This hatred derives from the very fact that Christians seek the lasting pleasure of truth rather than the ephemeral pleasure of what is trendy, or short-lived. And on this subject, Walker Percy sees that the world would rather evade reality than face it.

Third, G. K. Chesterton was quite pessimistic about the direction of the intellectual community at the advent of the twentieth century. "The great march of mental destruction goes on," he said, "Everything will be denied. . . . We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be those who have seen and yet believed."[12] It is precisely the clarity of classical learning that will help us preserve our sanity, our sense of reality, as the intellectual community around us grows more distant from the truths of Christianity, which are not subject to the whims of human desire. Percy's works describe how disorienting Christian life is our modern world, and what we assign in our classrooms can, if we are purposeful, function to help us think more critically about the overwhelming pressures placed upon us by modernity.

So, what is the bedrock assertion of my remarks? As Christians we are called to become free from the slavery of ignorance, to attain the liberation of the authentic Liberal Arts. The Trivium and Quadrivium, or a curriculum firmly rooted in these disciplines, does not merely expose us to an idea, but rather propels toward a Person – the Person of Jesus Christ, Who is the only true means of knowing and practicing love in the ruins of our collapsing world.

Notes:

[1] Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), 3.

[2] John 8:32.

[3] G. K. Chesterton, *Come to Think of It* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 56.

[4] Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Picador, 1980), 93.

[5] Romans 8:24.

[6] Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 5.

[7] Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 14.

[8] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* and *On Poetics*, Transl. by W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater (Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library, 1961), 10.

[9] James V. Schall, SJ, *The Mind that is Catholic: Philosophical and Political Essays* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 21.

[10] Josef Pieper, *An Anthology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 181.

[11] St. Cyprian, "On the Mortality," *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers, Vol. 3, The Writings of Cyprian*, Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868), 466.

[12] G. K. Chesterton, *Heritics*, in *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works, Vol. 1: Heretics, Orthodoxy, The Blachford Controversies* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 207.